



---

## WOMEN PERFORMERS AND PROSTITUTES IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Author(s): Shadab Bano

Source: *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 2009-2010, Vol. 70 (2009-2010), pp. 251-265

Published by: Indian History Congress

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147673>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Indian History Congress* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*

# WOMEN PERFORMERS AND PROSTITUTES IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Shadab Bano

Music and dance, the esoteric performing arts, being markers of culture in medieval India; a number of these differing forms and varieties developed into well-recognized and reputed arts overtime. The progress of these art-forms and in relation to each other varied, as preference and patronage to these did not remain same throughout. These practitioners accordingly were regarded as agents of refinement and culture. At the same time, music and dance had also been among the most popular forms of entertainment. There being a traditional linkage of these art-forms with entertainment, and physical pleasure as well tied to such forms of entertainment. These remained crucial in classifying musicians, singers and dancers as entertainers alongside the prostitutes. While the labelling together might have reduced the status of performers at times, it hardly remained fixed. Besides, certain practitioners even if involved in practices otherwise considered immoral continued to remain within the elite circle, while for others the evil characteristics got emphasized. There have been within the class of women who prostituted, the courtesans trained in skills of music and dancing, educated and cultivated in fine arts, who were treated more as embodiments of culture. The elite status of courtesans made the class stand apart from the ordinary prostitutes. These categories therefore had been quite fluid and shifty with thin line of distinction between them. The boundaries seemingly fused together. Still, the distinctions within them were there and did not totally disappear. These would have afforded notions of sanctity and purity to the class of performers claiming distinctiveness. The attempt in this paper is to look at different categories of women performers and prostitutes, their apparent coalescing boundaries and specialities as a separate group, their societal position, their shifting roles vis-a-vis male performers and the changes that affected their status.

Dance and music in the early Sultanate chronicles was seen as performances mainly by the captive-girls. Dance at the court particularly at that stage was performed by only women dancers.<sup>1</sup> The chronicles boasted of turning the women of defeated Indian *rajās* into singing and dancing girls. The celebrations and functions had these women perform. The point of emphasis in the accounts had been to completely humiliate and demoralise the conquered enemy, first by enslaving their women then by making them sing and dance. A more

severe punishment would be to give their daughters to the dancers 'to make them dance in the streets and the bazaars'.<sup>2</sup> As if not the enslavement alone but dancing and singing by the captives declared the triumph of the victorious army. What dealt a severe blow to the prestige of erstwhile defeated rulers was their women indulging in the mean, lowly work of entertaining. The sexual aspect already present in their slave status. These singing and dancing girls were prized ones to be given as presents to distinguished guests on occasions.<sup>3</sup>

Prized on account of their physical beauty and charms and accomplishments at singing and dancing; these slave performers appear close to girls sold as high-class concubines in the 14th century market in Delhi, as reported by al-Umari, whose price could rise to 20,000 tankas or more on account of her cultivated skills such as conversation, recitation of poetry, talent of dancing and singing.<sup>4</sup> al-Umari informs that these slave women could write and recite verses and stories, excelled in music, played the lute etc. These women vied with each other to captivate master's heart through their art. They wore most beautiful ornaments and jewellery and performed in most exquisite settings.

The dancing girls serving the court and aristocratic circles were a class apart compared to the ones who performed in the streets and bazaars. Dancing girls were also maintained by the merchants who organized their shows from place to place.<sup>5</sup> The professional 'dancers' of the market with their skills at singing and dancing, were not the same as ordinary prostitutes, who were mainly to provide sexual service and as Ferishta writes cause ruin of soldiers so many youth'.<sup>6</sup> Still the prostitutes might have lured the clients with singing and dancing to heighten pleasure, in the same way as professional dancers and singers might bestow sexual favours along with providing a cultural entertainment. These categories seemingly fused together but the contemporary accounts also bring out the differences.

The prostitute-houses in the Sultanate come up as distinct establishments with state having a direct interest to regulate the profession in order to earn revenues out of it. Alauddin Khilji's order came out with scheduled rates for sexual service and prostitutes classified as first, second and third to regulate the profession of this class of public women.<sup>7</sup> The legal position of the prostitute was also specified. A woman had to be registered as a prostitute and the state recognized a professional prostitute as a full person. While there was a recognition that a woman out of her will might also turn into a prostitute and for that her relations sever off all ties with her and turn out from the house. Her status was made low to the professional prostitute who

could appear as witness in the court. We also hear words of praises about the professional ethics of prostitutes.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, there appear no religious or ethical issues raised against prostitution and no attempt by the state to prohibit it.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, in making such distinction in status between a professional and a non-prostitute turning into a prostitute, while the state made available adulteress women for use in prostitution, there also appears a tacit recognition of other factors in the making of prostitutes. Balban raised a serious concern about men's sexual nature, as men will pounce on other men's wives and as adultery could not be tolerated, prostitution was regarded as safeguard against the passions of unruly men.<sup>10</sup> The brothels thereby came up in every city, in army stations to which 'all soldiers used to flock'. When in Alauddin Khilji reign prostitutes were conferred in marriage, it was to relieve the profession of too much congestion, rather than on moral grounds.<sup>11</sup>

Besides these public houses, distinct cultural establishments came to be patronized by the state. Ibn Batuta informs of 14<sup>th</sup> century Delhi, of select class of musicians for whom a large separate area with forty pavilions called Tarababad (city of music) was laid out, where the musicians, both male and female, used to live (perhaps in separate areas meant for them).<sup>12</sup> Sultan Muhammad particularly had a very large contingent of 1,200 musicians besides his slave musicians numbered 1,000 especially for the purpose of teaching music.<sup>13</sup> Their distinctiveness as women musicians are especially brought out as otherwise 'singing and dancing' were generally clubbed together in the accounts for describing performance by women artists.<sup>14</sup> These artists appear to enjoy some dignity who like their male counterparts took part in the body of *tarawih* prayers led by *imams* in the mosque during *ramzan*. These women clearly were not meant for sexual service and separate dwellings for them were not in order to regulate their harlotry but to mark their exclusive cultural abode.

Music and dance received great patronage by the Delhi Sultans and formed distinct art-form. Firuz Tughlaq came out with a treatise on music and dance (however referred as *paturbazi*).<sup>15</sup> The special interest in music of Sultan Sikander Lodi is noted.<sup>16</sup> The sultan from the Gujarat kingdom in 15<sup>th</sup> century similarly was a great connoisseur of music who could himself play any instrument and any sort of music.<sup>17</sup> One could find great exponents of music who had made their name in this art. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century kingdom of Gujarat, *Mirat-i-Sikandari* mentions 'famous and talented musicians' of the time by name.<sup>18</sup> These however were all male musicians, 'son of so and so'; the talent for singing being passed from father to son. The patronage was of a noble

Darya Khan whose patronage to music appears phenomenal. He had besides these many other singers, 'each of whom was an expert in his particular art'. By 16<sup>th</sup> century, in the art of dancing too, the male performers were spoken of in high terms.<sup>19</sup> They appear as class of accomplished performers. Dancing girls were also seen as experts in their respective art.<sup>20</sup> Rizqullah Mushtaqi calls the halls in the Indian palaces for instruction in dance as *talimkhana*, where princess received the training in dance.<sup>21</sup>

Still patronage to music and dance at times was attributed to devotion to pleasure. Under Darya Khan, it is reported that 'every house and mansion, every alley and market-place, echoed with the sound of music and song of carousal and revelry'. Moreover, the quality of performance by women artists got fully appreciated when combined with beauty and grace. Bai Champa, a dancer of Sultan Muzaffar II, was compared to goddess Saraswati and was greatly acclaimed for her extempore performance in poetry and dance.<sup>22</sup> The account adds that 'personification of Saraswati could be undertaken by such a one alone who is accomplished in all these arts and who can, besides, equal the goddess in perfection of beauty and loveliness'.

Different classes of dancing girls appear in the 16<sup>th</sup> century account - the *Domnis*, *Patars*, *Kumachnis*, *Pari-Shans* and *Lulis*. Each of these was in bands of thousands in the court of Sultan Bahadur of Gujarat.<sup>23</sup> These formed distinct caste groups, as were the specific castes of male entertainers, such as *bhagatiyas*, *bhands*, *kalawants*.<sup>24</sup> The *patars*, for instance, was a celebrated caste of performers belonging to the Hindu branch, while the *lulis* were the Muslim ones. The traditions have the *patars* and the *naiks*, the class of celebrated musicians belong to the same family of performers.<sup>25</sup> The rich patronage to these classes of performers by the court distinguished them from others of their caste who performed in the market. One could note that these free-born could be held by the Sultan or the noble as concubines for themselves, without any scruple.<sup>26</sup> The ruler could keep them and then pass on to friendly ruler or nobles as gifts and favours. When Sher Shah ordered the *patars* kept by the *amirs* to be taken by force, there was no ethical question involved here, but the ruler simply tried to deal with his nobility and snatch from them these markers of status.<sup>27</sup> These women performers had become cultural embodiments prized for their dancing and singing skills, beauty and charm.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century European accounts bring out more vividly the class of *kanchanis* who by this time perhaps have outshone others in terms of royal and aristocratic patronage, their presence and performances must have been striking enough to deserve such detailed reports.

Manucci reports that those who performed in the court were 'more esteemed than others, by reason of their beauty. When they go to court, to the number of more than five hundred, they all ride in highly embellished vehicles, and clothed in rich raiment.'<sup>28</sup> Clearly, they were by now quite a distinguished class of elite performers; depending off course on royal and aristocratic patronage but having their own organizational set-up. They performed twice a week at the court for which they received pay. Bernier clearly brings out their elite status, differentiating them from the prostitutes of the *bazaar*. Those were 'of a more private and respectable class who attend the grand weddings of *Omrahs* and mansabdars for the purpose of singing and dancing. These did not normally prostitute to even men of class'.<sup>29</sup> Not only were the high class *Kanchani* performers appreciated for their singing and dancing the ordinary *Kanchani* performers of the market are described mainly as singing and dancing girls. Ordinarily the dancing women used to 'dance in the principal open places in the city, beginning at six o'clock in the evening and going on till nine, lighted by many torches and from this dancing they earned a good deal of money'.<sup>30</sup> Viewing dance performance had been an important form of public entertainment.

An incident reported by Bernier brings out the position of *kanchanis* as dancing girls.<sup>31</sup> A French physician of the Mughal court who greatly desired a *kanchan* was much disappointed when all his solicitations for her were turned down by her mother. Much on sexual bestowal remained a preference with the *kanchanis*. Besides, the mother feared for her daughter that she might lose her health and vigour with virginity, especially as this class of performers saw their prosperity through proficiency in music and dance. The issue became a laughing stock at the court when the physician sought the Emperor's intervention, by refusing to take the present bestowed on him other than the *kanchani* girl for the prize. This was considered as little likely to happen as the girl was Muslim and a *kanchani*. When Jahangir after much amusement ordered to 'let him carry the kanchan away', he is said to have done so as he 'never felt religious scruples'. Even if freedom in such matters remained vulnerable, we could see boundaries being emphasized allowing some extent of purity and sanctity to the class.

Mughal official sources similarly bring out the category of singing and dancing girls, and make distinctions between the other women who prostituted - the high courtesan and the ordinary prostitute. There were courtly performers in singing and dancing. The girls are referred generally as *ahl-i-tarab* and *ahl-i-saz*. *Tawaifa* referred for bands of singing girls and the performers in plural.<sup>32</sup> These were amongst numerous musicians and dancers employed by the Mughal court, both

men and women 'by thousands and thousands'.<sup>33</sup> Besides, Abul Fazl describes the practice of *akhara*, music-dance performance in the aristocratic households by good-looking domestic slaves, trained to dance, sing and play the instruments by the *natwas* who sometimes take their women to the noble for such employment.<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that though the singing and dancing girls have striking presence during functions of the court and seraglio, brought out by the depictions in text and the miniatures, there is no mention of a single women musician in the list of principal musicians of Akbar's court (in *Ain-i-Akbari*) with the names of thirty six musicians in it. However, as the title used for these women denotes, they were principally noted as artists and performers. On the other hand, was the other category of courtesans with clear recognition of their elite status, distinct from the ordinary prostitute referred as *fahisha*. Abul Fazl brings out the episode of Aram Jan, mentioning her as a *luli* and Badauni also referring to her as *luli* and by no other term.<sup>35</sup>

Despite distinctions certain ambiguities remained with their societal position, not only by the fact that all of these could be kept as concubines (observed earlier) and as wives by marriage, but more importantly also on account of their treatment by the writers in official circles. Badauni reports of an affair of a courtier Gosalah Banarsi with a *fahisha*, but who in much probability appears as a courtesan of rank. He here clubs together 'the *fahisha* and *ahl-i-tarab*'.<sup>36</sup> One could notice Badauni's appeal to romanticism and higher moral virtue in love being brought out by his love stories, which he extends also to the singing woman (*ahl-i-tarab*).<sup>37</sup> The story reaches its climax by the singing girl's exemplary act to serve her dead lover's grave, still one could not miss the moral epithets and phrases like the 'house-devastating' (*khane kharaab*, *khane barandaaz*) used for the girl amidst the overall sympathetic narration. Perhaps, the extra-ordinary element in the story worth recounting was also on account of the fact that the woman loved was a singing girl who as if by an exceptional feat responded to the higher emotions of love, which normally was not expected from the class.<sup>38</sup>

There appears a hardening of moral position more clearly from Abul Fazl's account of Aram Jan.<sup>39</sup> He is critical of Ali Quli Khan marrying a *luli* 'for lust, surrendering to the street walker, who was embraced by thousands' and for the shamelessness with which he brought 'the wretch to the drinking-parties'. While Abul Fazl takes strong views of the lawful marriage being disregarded and the woman passed on in adulterous relationship to other man, Shaham Beg and from him to yet another man to whom she marries the second time, all



in contravention to any ethical norm, and for which he mainly blames the men involved, but Aram Jan does not receive any sympathy for such handling by men. Neither her first marriage nor the other was regarded by men, including Abul Fazl who speaks of her mainly as a public woman, a *luli*. In fact, the anecdote seems to emphasize the misfortune befalling men and the futility of the strife for the sake of a public woman. The position of performers and courtesans, therefore, would have suffered when conflated with that of ordinary prostitutes.

At the same time, one could notice strong moral position against prostitution by the Mughal state. Badauni tells us that the prostitutes should be kept in separate quarters of the town.<sup>40</sup> As filth needs to be covered up, care was taken so that the sewer does not contaminate the entire city. Their locality to be called *shaitanpura* and their trade thoroughly to be within the state regulation. A *darogha* and a clerk were to register the names of men who visited prostitutes and only with official permission could one be allowed to take a dancing girl home. A strict state system of license especially worked for virgins (*bekaarat*) to be taken home. If any noble wanted to have a virgin, they should first apply to the emperor and get his permission. In the same way, boys prostituted themselves. Capital punishment was also inflicted for flouting of rules<sup>41</sup>. The high surveillance was mainly to check and regulate morals, for otherwise their numbers had grown to such an extent in the capital that they could hardly be counted.

Since the sewer becomes necessary in order to protect rest of the place from foul and filth it could not be completely done away with. The state concedes to the physical drives plaguing men for which prostitutes were to be made available, even so under a good police, and at the same time, prostitution is also seen as emerging out of wantonness in females. An imperial order speaks that 'if a young woman was found running about the lanes and bazaars of the towns, and while so doing either did not veil herself, or allowed herself to become unveiled,' she should be sent to the quarter of prostitutes and take up the profession.<sup>42</sup> Similarly if the woman was bad, or quarrelled with her husband, she was fit to be a prostitute. The same order says that if a woman is older than her husband by twelve years, he should not lie with her.<sup>43</sup> All of these seen as deviance in women, and primarily arising out of hyper-sexuality of women, prostitution thus serves as a vent to their problem or serves them right in punishment. Prostitutes were juxtaposed to the ideal-chaste wife, as 'house-devastating women' and therefore a detestable category.

The category of virgins being officially recognized hints at the recognition of other factors as well such as lay in economic destitution



and displacements etc. in the making of prostitutes, for which some sympathy by the state is forthcoming, but then the rest of the prostitutes were present by sinful choice. Even so, the strict action by the state against notables for using virgins in the profession appears mainly to ensure moral purity of the nobility and to claim censure on its private activities rather than to protect the class of entertainers/prostitutes, who otherwise could be passed over to the nobles through the official sanction.<sup>44</sup>

We find the state trying to position itself morally in many other ways as well in the period. For instance, the imperial order specified judicious use of wine that could be allowed if used for strengthening the body but not to allow mischief and impropriety from the use of it. "For the sake of keeping everything in proper limits, His Majesty established a wine-shop near the palace.....the price of wine was fixed by regulations, any sick persons could obtain wine on sending his own name and the name of his father and grandfather to the clerk of the shop".<sup>45</sup> (look at its close analogy with prostitution). The impulse to reform could not have arisen out of borrowings from Islamic disdain for these practices which otherwise also even if prohibited by the law was normal occurrence in the Islamic societies. The Mughal state was perhaps responding to the over-all change in the moral-ethical world view of those times, reflected in ideas spearheaded by popular movements, and new ways of thinking by the ruling elite,<sup>46</sup> which had been to such an extent that even in the discussions and debates among the theologian class, institutions having legal acceptance in Islam like slavery, sale of children during famines, issue of marriage and divorce etc. were being challenged. The moral positioning had been on many fronts and accounts.

With the state claiming the higher moral ground, the targeting of prostitutes must have been imperative. The reform of morals was limited to not prostitutes alone, but extended to other sections of entertainers. The *kanchanis* performance in the Mughal court by seventeenth century, 'as by long established usage' was only on Wednesdays in *Diwan-i-Aam and Khas* 'where they make the salaam from a distance and then immediately retire', a practice on which Aurangzeb insisted.<sup>47</sup> Shah Jahan's encouragement to the *kanchanis* was reported as a transgression of bounds of decency (in admitting them into seraglio for night's performance), which Aurangzeb tried to set right. Aurangzeb later ordered the dancing girls to either marry or leave the realm. Marriage was to teach them lessons in modesty. The royal connections with the dancing girls are reported as scandalous, and we hear of the lurid accounts of such entanglements by the European observers. Not only

was marriage to dancing girls highly disapproved of but to have them as concubines was also considered unworthy of royalty. Manucci reports that when Shah Jahan tried to keep one of the *kanchanis* in his palace as a concubine, some of the nobles represented to him saying that 'a woman of that rank was unworthy of being placed in the royal palace.'<sup>48</sup> In view of the negative image of the performers, the looseness of their morals and conduct any involvement with such a performer could breed insubordination and irreverence to authority. This perhaps explains for the extreme action of the Mughal governor (1638-9) against dancing girls, ordering their execution when they refused to come for performance on his summons with the justification that if he did not take this course he would no longer be the governor, 'for they would play the masters and drive me out of the city.'<sup>49</sup>

In spite of the denigrating figure of prostitute emerging out of these positions, one could find the societal view of it as quite diverse. Banarsidas speaks of his intense emotions of love for the woman. He writes, 'I was in love and I gave myself up to this consuming passion with the whole-hearted yearning and devotion of a *sufi-fakir*..... Following the right etiquette in such matters, I called myself the 'slave' of my beloved, always referring to myself as 'poor one'. It is only a presumption that his beloved was a courtesan/prostitute though it may be a legitimate inference from the statement that 'I even stooped to stealing money and jewels from my father so that I could buy her costly presents and offer her the choicest sweets.'<sup>50</sup> More vividly the personal diary of a noble, Dargah Quli Khan in 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which he notes his observations of his visit to Delhi (1737-41), brings out in open and unabashed fashion the life and culture of the place, where in the fun and gaiety, the joys and celebrations of everyday life and festivals the pursuit of physical pleasures by the ruling gentry and the common folk was considered commonplace. In the Chowk Saadullah market in Delhi, special potents were sold in open market and men ready to pay heavily for the medicines to make them more virile and increase their sexuality.<sup>51</sup> Along with women prostitutes there were catamites in the trade. Beautiful lads danced in regular intervals and the place was full of catamites. 'Whenever one raises one's eyes there are beautiful faces and when one extends a hand it rubs across someone's neck'.<sup>52</sup> The spiritual hubs, the abodes of *sufi* saints or cultural gatherings, the *urs* or *mehfil*, provided perfect ambience for plying of all sort of trades, for the mimicks, *qawwals*, the singing and dancing girls, catamites, pimps and prostitutes. The mix of spiritual with the physical is all the more striking, so that the places of reverence become centres for pleasurable activities. People flocked to these places. In the *urs* of Bahadur Shah, 'the debauched and the drunken unmindful of the

muhtasib revel in all kinds of perversities...All around prevails the world of impiety and immorality in different hues. The whores and lads entice more and more people to this atmosphere of lasciviousness.....In short, both the nobles and the plebians quench the thirst of their lust here.<sup>53</sup> In the celebrations of *basant*, it is reported, the artists of all kinds performed. 'On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, all the dancers get together and go to the grave of Azizi, in Ahadipura and wash it with wine, and take it in turn to dance. They feel their dancing and singing will provide peace and pleasure to his soul.....the pleasure seekers and the visitors join in the revelry of these six days and desire a year worth of pleasure'.<sup>54</sup> In the *mehfils*, 'the beautiful lads and lasses exhibit themselves without a trace of shyness'.<sup>55</sup>

Interestingly, even as the account of the prostitutes' trade speaks of the lasciviousness and impiety, it is not discussed as a matter of reproach. In fact, the affairs are brought out in all vivacity for a titillating effect. The author appears fully aware of all such places and occasions which provided for physical gratification. Besides, he devotes separately a full section to the class of entertainers, *arbab-i-tarab* where he provides short notices of the performers, the famous singing and dancing girls along with the male artists, the musicians, *naqqals*, *qawwals* etc.<sup>56</sup> The class of distinguished performers/courtesans with their specialty in their respective art appears. We come to know by name about some of the famous women musicians and dancers of Delhi of those times, respected for their talent and living in great style and grandeur. Their aura and artistic talent was clearly valued and marked as symbols of refinement and high culture. Their practice in etiquette, skills in poetic compositions and their special talent in singing, dancing gets fully appreciated. Some of these continued to be valued in spite of passing of youth and for purely talent. A later couplet added to the illustration of a courtesan's portrait (ca.1585) praises the courtesan for her spectacular beauty.<sup>57</sup>

Besides, one might notice a change in ruling elite's perception of this class as well by the eighteenth century. The connections with courtesans began to be regarded more legitimate. The instances of courtesan entering royal and aristocratic households in marriages become more numerous by 18<sup>th</sup> century. Some of these assumed tremendous political clout.<sup>58</sup> Spaces and patronage to the women performers appear phenomenal. Many of them in turn were patrons of poets, scholars, musicians and dancers. The affluence of the *kothas* became subject of literary writings of the period. Dargah Quli Khan brings out the initiative of a *mansabdar*, Kusal Singh in establishing a colony of prostitutes, Kusalpura, where they could carry their trade

freely.<sup>59</sup> The documents from Allahabad speaks of *Kotwal's* ordering exemption of *mahsul* on purchase of slave girls by particular courtesans/prostitutes(mention the term used) and that no one should harass them on this ground.<sup>60</sup>

The social mixing with the courtesans/dancing girls appear at various levels. The social acceptability of this class could be seen from the fact that the same *tazkiras* published the compositions of women of elite households and the courtesans.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly in this period, we come to notice more women from aristocratic households composing poetry that found space (*zitr*) in the famous *tazkiras* towards the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. The literary domain already available to public women by nature of their profession became available to women of respectable households. The gentry women began to have reputation of talented women. There were more direct mingling of the courtesan/dancing girls within the domestic space, as we know through early 19<sup>th</sup> century accounts. They were present at the routine festivities of the elite and the common folk.<sup>62</sup> *Lulis* were called to play holi in the elite households. Their performance within households could be witnessed by the women of the house. It is reported that while the Muslim elite kept away from the *kathak* dance performed by the boys (part of the Hindu high culture), it was within dignity to have performances by dancing girls at home.<sup>63</sup> Qateel bring in the traditional singers the *domnis*, *mirasis* perform during functions and weddings.<sup>64</sup> Meer Hasan also informs that *domnies*, dancers and singers admitted to the interiors 'are women of good character and their songs are of chastest description'.<sup>65</sup> It was from the caste of *domnies* that the superior ones rose to equip the *kothas* and as famous courtesans.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, there were the *kasbis' natches* in the zamindar's household every night during *phagun* (February and March) to which the women of the family could view from the concealed spots.<sup>67</sup>

It was later by the British regime that these forms of entertainment were regarded as signs of sexual depravity in the natives. The nautsch-girl became a detestable category and her performance amorous and vulgar. To which was included a vast variety of performers and artists. Similarly the term *tawaif* in the survey reports 19<sup>th</sup> century, almost became a generic name for the prostitutes, meant to include a whole range of dancers, singers, entertainers like *nats*, *rasdharis*(Brahmin singers from Mathura), *mirasis*, *mangta*, *baheliya* singers etc. The Census of 1891 gives the district wise distribution of prostitutes and dancing girls clubbed together.<sup>68</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Ibn Batuta's account of festivities at the Delhi court. Male musicians and singers were there, a number of them being slaves, but male dancers were not mentioned among the performers at the court. *Rihla*, tr. H.A.R. Gibb, *The travels of Ibn Batuta*, Cambridge, 1956-71, vol.III,p.686.
2. As done by Sher Shah in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as the practice of chastising the recalcitrant through enslavement continued. He ordered the boy captives to be castrated and gave the daughters to the dancers of the *bazaar*. Rizquallah Mushtaqi, *Waqiat-i-Mushtaqi*, tr. I.H. Siddiqui, New Delhi, 1993, p.154.
3. *Rihla*, III, pp.667-8.
4. Shihabuddin al Umari, *Masalik al Absar fi Mamalik al Ansar*, tr. Ottospies, S.A.Rashid and S.M.Haq, Aligarh, 1943,p.46
5. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century court of Ghiyasuddin the band performed a show by fixing up a curtain between them and the audience, dressed in the fashion of *bhands* (an entertainer caste). *Waqiat-i-Mushtaqi*, p.
6. Mohammed Qasim Ferishta, *Tarikh-i Ferishta*, ed. Nawal Kishore, Lucknow, 1323 A.H./ p.114.
7. Ibid., Ferishta uses the term *Quhba* and *tuta* for them. Perhaps the different class of prostitutes meant to separate the accomplished ones, the courtesans, from the ordinary prostitutes.
8. Shihabuddin al Umari, *Masalik al Absar fi Mamalik al Ansar*, tr.I.H. Siddiqi and Qazi Mohammad Ahmad, *A Fourteenth Century Arab Account of India Under Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq*, Aligarh, 1971, p.67. He goes at length to describe the tradition by which a temple was equipped by a queen with prostitutes in order to provide free sexual service to travellers. The narration without any hint of scorn approaches the matter of male sexual nature and of provision for poor men who do not have money to pay to prostitutes as a legitimate problem (pp.68-9).
9. Ashraf, *Life and conditions*, pp.265. Dance and music by public women were integral to social pleasures and entertainment. They were also to be found in celebration of marriages and other domestic functions.
10. Zia Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, ed. Sk. Abdur Rashid, Aligarh, 1957, p.51. Barani uses the term *tawaif* for prostitutes.
11. Cf. Ashraf, *Life and conditions*, pp.265.
12. *Rihla*, III,p.625.
13. Al Umari, tr. Ottospies, p.32.
14. Such description of performance would have affected the status of women musicians vis-a-vis male musicians and singers as their singing was seen as complementary and assisting dance and not of independent quality.
15. Cf. Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhabu-t- Tawarikh*, ed. Captain William Nesolias and Munshi Ahmad Ali, Calcutta, 1865, vol.I, p.249. 16<sup>th</sup> century accounts refer to dancing girls, possibly of the Hindu branch, chiefly as *pateurs*. Pateurs as seen later appear as one amongst the other classes of dance performers.
16. He employed the best musicians of his kingdom and had them perform in late hours of night and early morning within his bedchambers on particular *ragas* and instruments he preferred. *Waqiat-i-Mushtaqi*, p.67
17. Sikandar Ibn Mohammad, *Mirat-i-Sikandari*, ed. S.C. Misra and M.L. Rahman, Baroda, 1961, pp.222-23.

18. Ibid, pp.333-4.
19. Ibid. Dancers like Mohanrao and Rangrao and Desirao and Kanhuraio were noted for their greatness in the art of dance.
20. *Mirat-i- Sikandari*, pp. 222-23, 288.
21. *Waqiat-i-Mushtaqi*, p.104.
22. *Mirat-i-Sikandari*, pp.222-3.
23. Ibid, p.247.
24. Ibid,p.191;Badauni , I,p.557.
25. Atkinson reports of an old tradition that the *naiqs* were the male offspring and *patur*s female offspring of the temporary alliances between soldiers and Kumaoni womenfolk. They became celebrated performers and by 16<sup>th</sup> century Sher Shah reportedly attacked the fortress of Kalinjar to get hold of the *pata(patur)* with Kirat Singh. W.Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North Western India*, Delhi, 1975, vol.IV, p.366.
26. In an instance when Sultan expressed religious considerations in not accepting these women as gifts, it was mentioned as an exception. *Mirat-i-Sikandari*, pp.191-2.
27. Elephants 'in the same manner' were seized from them and gave orders that red tent was to be confined solely to the use of royalty. Badauni, vol.I, p.384.
28. Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogol*, tr. W. Irvine, London, 1906-8, vol. I, p.189.
29. Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire (A.D. 1656-68)* ,revised V.A. Smith, p.273. Even if their status as entertainers and performers were emphasized, still the comparison made with the ordinary prostitutes indicate the latent conceived similarities.
30. Manucci, vol.I,p.189.
31. Bernier, pp.274-5.
32. We hear the term *tawaif* used for prostitutes in Sultanate. Barani, vol.I, p.51.Later on *tawaif* became the generic title used for prostitutes and dancing girls alike.
33. Badauni, vol.II, p.301. The court received 'singing and dancing women' also from campaigns. Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, ed. Agha Ahmad Ali Ali and Abdur Rahim, Calcutta, 1887, vol.III, p.711.
34. *Ain-i-Akbari*, ed. Nawal Kishore, Lucknow, 1882, vol.III, p.113.
35. *Akbarnama*, vol.II, pp.83-4;Badauni, vol.II, pp.21-4
36. Badauni, vol.II, p.405. This may be on account of his hostility towards Gosalah Banarsi, as he became closer to the emperor by Abul Fazl's intervention. Badauni calls him a catamite (*ajeen*)
37. Ibid, pp.118-9.
38. The climax of the story was by the singing girl going into mourning and choosing to sweep all her life the tomb of her lover, who committed suicide in desperation at his failed attempts to unite with the girl. It was a protest against the state and society that would not allow them to meet.
39. *Akbarnama*, vol. II, p.84.
40. Badauni, vol.II, p.302.
41. Ibid, pp. 302-3. Badauni however is critical of discriminatory treatment in meting punishment to people for such offences while privileged men could do whatever

they liked.

42. Badauni, vol.II, pp. 375-6,380.
43. Abul Fazl also mentions this under regulations of marriages, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol.I, p. 143.
44. Badauni informs that some principal prostitutes (*fawaish chandi ra ke mashhoor boodand*) were asked as to who deprived them of virginity and on hearing the case took action against some of the principal nobles. Badauni, vol. II, pp.302-3.
45. Badauni, vol.II, p.301. He says that 'Off course people sent fictitious names.....it was nothing else but licensing a shop for drunkards'.
46. Studies have looked up at the socio-economic change during the 15-16<sup>th</sup> centuries that stimulated a change in the cultural milieu and ways of thinking. Irfan Habib sees great winds of change in the period and brings out the social equities and reforms by Akbar.
47. Bernier, p.273.
48. His reply to them 'a good article may be from any shop' only showed his licentious nature. Manucci, I,p.189.
49. M.S. Commissariat, *Mandelso's Travels in Western India (1638-39)*, New Delhi/Madras, 1995, p.39.
50. Banarsidas, *Ardhakathanaka*, tr. Mukund Lath , *Half a Tale, A study in the Relationship Between Autobiography and History*, Jaipur, 1981, pp.26-9.
51. Dargah Quli Khan, *Muraqqa-i-Dehli*, ed. Nurul Hasan Ansari, Delhi,1982,p. 36
52. Ibid., pp.35,36.
53. Ibid,p.32.
54. Ibid, pp.55-6.
55. Ibid, pp.56-7
56. Ibid.,pp.81-113
57. Michael Brand and Glenn D. Lowry, *Akbar's India Art from the Mughal City of Victory*, pl.50.
58. Modern scholars have viewed their influence in politics arising out of immorality and as a factor for decline of regimes.
59. *Muraqqa-i-Dehli*, pp. 61-2.
60. Calendar of Acquired Document from National Archives, at CAS in History, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, pp. 152, 153,154.
61. Ghulam Hamdani Mushafi, *Tazkira-i-Shu'ara / Tazkira-i-Hindi*, ed. Akbar Haideri Kashmiri, Lucknow, 1980, pp.316-18.
62. Mirza Mohammad Hasan Qateel, *Haft Tamasha*, Lucknow, 1875,p.80.
63. Ibid, pp.70-71.
64. Qateel, p.98. It was from within the caste that the superior rose to reputation, as referred by Dargah Quli and the *Rajpatras* of Buchanon.
65. Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmanns of India: Manners, Customs, Habits and Religious Opinions*, Delhi, reprint 1973,vol.I, p.195.
66. It was from within the caste that the superior rose to reputation, as noted by Dargah Quli Buchanon similarly tells us that *Rajpatras* were 'of dignity superior to the common.....At Patna, five sets of the dancing girls called *bai* have considerable



celebrity and are considered by the natives as very accomplished.....Mahtab, the chief singer (Hindu), is in the highest request. Like the others, she usually goes to Calcutta during the Durgapuja; and when she first appeared, being about 15 years of age, she had 1,000 rs. for the three nights performance. (Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Bihar and Patna in 1811-12*, New Delhi, 1986, pp.612-13).

67. Donald Butter, *Topography and Statistics of Southern Districts of Awadh*, Delhi, 1839, ed. Safi Ahmad, Delhi, 1982, pp.153-4.
68. Crooke, *Tribes and Castes*, vol.IV, pp.364-71.